

Understanding Ong's Philosophical Thought

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Walter J. Ong's massively researched 1954 Harvard University doctoral dissertation was published, slightly revised, by Harvard University Press in two volumes in 1958: (1) *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* and (2) *Ramus and Talon Inventory*. Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was a French logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr. At Harvard College, which was founded in 1636, Ramist logic dominated the arts course of study, as it dominated the arts course of study at Cambridge University and elsewhere.

Basically, Ong's second volume, *Ramus and Talon Inventory*, is an annotated bibliography of the more than 750 printed volumes by Ramus and his followers and critics that Ong had tracked down in more than 100 different libraries -- almost all of them in Latin.

For centuries after Latin ceased being a living language, or mother tongue, it continued to be a widely used lingua franca in Western culture, a second language, a father tongue, so to speak. Concerning the tradition of Literature in Latin, Ong liked to cite E. R. Curtius' book *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated from the German by Willard R. Trask (1953).

But the status of Latin as a lingua franca set in motion the campaign for vernacular languages. Before the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were early entries in the campaign for vernacular literatures. After the Gutenberg printing press emerged, in the English-speaking world, the campaign for the vernacular included Shakespeare and the 1611 King James Bible. Of course the campaign for the vernaculars won out. However, in the Roman Catholic Church, Latin continued as the church's official lingua franca until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) elected to endorse the use of vernacular languages.

In Ong's 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, Ong discusses the campaign for vernacular languages, instead of Latin as the lingua franca (pages 10-16, 305). In Ong's 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, he discusses mother tongues versus learned languages such as Latin as a lingua franca (pages 112-116, 130).

In Virginia Woolf's last essays, "Anon" and "The Reader," she creatively begins to construct a narrative history of the unfolding development of vernacular English, starting with anonymous works. See my 2015 essay "Virginia Woolf's Last Essays and Walter J. Ong's Thought" at the UMD's d-Commons: <https://d-commons.d.umn.edu:8443/handle/10792/2547>.

The year after Ong died in 2003 at the age of 90, the University of Chicago Press reissued his landmark 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* in a paperback edition with a new foreword by Adrian Johns.

For Ong, the art of reason is exemplified in Descartes (pages 7, 115, 121, 125, 198, 229, 230, 251, 307) and Kant (pages 54, 121, 315). But Ong centers his attention on their ancient, medieval, and early modern (also known as Renaissance) predecessors. Ong's 1958 book still richly repays careful study.

In it Ong works with the aural-visual contrast that he acknowledges he borrowed from THE French philosopher Louis Lavelle (1883-1951), most notably from his book *La parole et l'écriture*, 2nd ed. (1942), which has never been translated into English. The aural-visual contrast is also known as the sound-sight contrast.

For Ong, words are cries -- basically sound.

But written words involve sight -- both to write them and to see them.

In addition, written words are written in space.

For Ong, the spatialization of thought expressed implicitly in written words in space on parchment or another substance, and the quantification of thought expressed in certain words in logic combine to make a heady brew, especially in print culture in Western culture.

For centuries in the history of formal logic, the quantification of thought in medieval logic was expressed in words. As Ong explains, certain genuine developments in medieval logic were anonymously incorporated into the Aristotelian tradition of logic. Eventually however, as Ong explains, the quantification of thought became expressed in symbols -- in modern symbolic logic.

In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, Ong discusses spatialization in connection with the aural-to-visual shift on pages 92-93, 104-112, 128, 151-156, 244-245, 273, 277-279, 284-292, 307-314, and quantification on pages 53-91, 184, 262, 263.

After Ong's 1958 book about Peter Ramus and Ramism was published, Ong reflected further on his research and then wrote the following statement regarding the quantification of thought in medieval logic:

"In this historical perspective, medieval scholastic logic appears as a kind of premathematics, a subtle and unwitting preparation for the large-scale operations in quantitative modes of thinking which will characterize the modern world. In assessing the meaning of [medieval] scholasticism, one must keep in mind an important and astounding fact: in the whole history of the human mind, mathematics and mathematical physics come into their own, in a way which has changed the face of the earth and promises or threatens to change it even more, at only one place and time, that is, in Western Europe immediately after the [medieval] scholastic experience [in short, in print culture]. Elsewhere, no matter how advanced the culture on other scores, and even along mathematical lines, as in the case of the Babylonian, nothing like a real mathematical

transformation of thinking takes place – not among the ancient Egyptians or Assyrians or Greeks or Romans, not among the peoples of India nor the Chinese nor the Japanese, not among the Aztecs or Mayas, not in Islam despite the promising beginnings there, any more than among the Tartars or the Avars or the Turks. These people can all now share the common scientific knowledge, but the scientific tradition itself which they share is not a merging of various parallel discoveries made by their various civilizations. It represents a new state of mind. However great contributions other civilizations may hereafter make to the tradition, our scientific world traces its origins back always to seventeenth and sixteenth century Europe [in short, to Copernicus and Galileo], to the place where for some three centuries and more the [medieval] arts course taught in universities and parauniversity schools had pounded into the heads of youth a study program consisting almost exclusively of a highly quantified logic and a companion physics, both taught on a scale and with an enthusiasm never approximated or even dreamt of in ancient academies” (quoted from Ong’s collection of his essays titled *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* [1962, page 72]; boldface emphasis here added by me).

The key sentence in the above quotation: “It [the real mathematical transformation of thinking] represents a new state of mind” – the state of mind advanced by print culture that emerged in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s. As Ong shows, this state of mind was present in medieval culture and contributed to significant developments in the Aristotelian tradition of logic, developments that went significantly beyond Aristotle’s own contribution to logic – developments that moved toward modern symbolic logic, but developments in which words were used, not symbols. As I say, this new state of mind was advanced by print culture in Western culture, in which unprecedented numbers of people were educated enough that they learned to read and write.

But here we should note a difference between ancient and medieval culture in Western culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, print culture in Western culture. In ancient and medieval culture in Western culture, this new state of mind co-existed in certain educated people in the prestige culture alongside the current-traditional culture of ordinary people. Woolf’s essay “Anon” about the medieval vernacular English culture is about the current-traditional culture of ordinary people in medieval England.

But in print culture in Western culture, the educated people in the prestige culture extended the values and orientation of this new state of mind to unprecedented scope, largely because unprecedented numbers of ordinary people had learned how to read and write.

To be sure, people who did not know how to read and write continued to exist in Western culture. But they tended to be excluded from the ascendant prestige culture, in which this new state of mind was in the ascendancy.

According to Ong, this new state of mind was advanced by print culture in Western culture. It contributed to the development of modern science, modern capitalism, modern democracy as

exemplified in our American experiment in democracy, the Industrial Revolution, and the Romantic Movement in literature and philosophy and the arts – in short, modernity.

In other words, Ong sees Western liberalism (economic and political) and individualism, and much else as fueled by the infrastructures involved in print culture in Western culture, as he has detailed those infrastructures in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* and elsewhere.

To this day, Ong's perceptive account of the philosophical infrastructures involved in Western cultural history is a radical one.

For a far more superficial and conventional account of Western cultural history, see the Canadian philosophy professor Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor spoke at the Ong Conference at Saint Louis University in the spring of 2005 and claimed to have read Ong's *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. But Taylor did not grasp the import of Ong's thought in that book.

Ironically enough, before Ong proceeded to Harvard for his doctoral studies in English, he had been educated in American Catholic educational institutions. At the time, college-educated American Catholics, like their college-educated co-religionists around the world, were indoctrinated by the Roman Catholic Church to be against modernity and its supposed concomitant secularism. This attitude is aptly captured in the title of Philip Gleason's book *Contending with Modernity: [American] Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995). No doubt the spirit of contending with modernity was present in Ong's education. However, from about the early 1950s onward, there is no evidence in his mature work that he continued to see himself as contending with modernity. In his mature work, he is not contending with modernity.

On the one hand, we may wonder why the Roman Catholic Church was so energetically contending with modernity and its supposed concomitant secularism.

On the other hand, we may wonder what happened to Ong that he stopped contending with modernity. He stopped contending with modernity before the Second Vatican Council officially changed certain church teachings. It appears that Ong abandoned his church's spirit of contending with modernity as a result of his new understanding of Western cultural history, inspired primarily by Lavelle's work with the aural-visual opposition.

Ong's most widely known and most widely translated book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), published in Methuen's New Accents series in literary studies, contains not only a chapter titled "Writing restructures consciousness" (pages 78-116) but also a chapter titled "Print, space and closure" (pages 117-138). The latter chapter includes a subsection titled "More diffuse effects" (pages 130-132). In that subsection, Ong claims that print "encouraged and made possible on a large scale the quantification of knowledge, both

through the use of mathematical analysis and through the use of diagrams and charts [involving spatialization of knowledge]” (page 130).

Now, in his groundbreaking philosophical masterpiece *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957), the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) mocks the tendency in Western philosophical thought to equate knowing with “taking a good look.” According to him, that tendency produces naïve realism. Over against and in contradistinction to naïve realism, Lonergan advocates critical realism.

In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, Ong makes a point comparable to Lonergan’s point about “taking a good look,” but also somewhat different from Lonergan’s critique, when he (Ong) refers to the “unwary”:

“[T]he constant traffic in the visible and tangible maintained by [medieval] suppositional theory [in logic] reinforced the tendency of the unwary to consider objects as somehow lifted into the mind by conceptualization and as being equipped with their accidental modifications in a fashion only too crudely analogous with processes observable in the external world. . . . This tendency is reinforced by the notion of *supposition* itself when one examines the elementary metaphor it involves. In Cicero and others, *supponere* meant to substitute, so that the unwary easily came to think of terms not as ‘signifying’ things or reality, not as affording an insight into reality, but as surrogates or substitutes for things. . . . This substitution view lends itself readily to visualist conceptualization: a term is not seen in its relation to a word, a cry, but rather one imagines the thing the thing as whisked away in space and a term as set in its place. The psychological complexities and mysteries of the actual semantic situation can never be completely reduced thus visually or spatially, since the situation involves an irreducible analogy with auditory activity, the calling of the ‘names’ of things” (pages 69-70; also see pages 107-108, 109).

In *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, Ong uses various expressions to characterize the corpuscular view of reality (also referred to as the corpuscular epistemology and corpuscular psychology; pages 65-66, 72, 146, 171, 203, 210).

In effect, what Ong refers to as the corpuscular view of reality is comparable to what Lonergan refers to as naïve realism in *Insight*.

For an accessible philosophical explanation of why the human mind is not corpuscular, see Mortimer J. Adler’s perceptive book *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (1990). Also see James H. Fetzer’s book *Artificial Intelligence: Its Scope and Limits* (1990).

In the 1994 introduction to the second edition of his 1965 book, *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge*, based on Lonergan’s philosophical masterpiece *Insight*, Michael Novak in effect critiques the world-as-view sense of life expressed in Richard Rorty’s philosophy:

“Rorty thinks that in showing that the mind is not ‘the mirror of nature’ he has disproved the correspondence theory of truth. What he has really shown is that the activities of the human mind cannot be fully expressed by metaphors based upon the operations of the eye [as Novak knows, both Ong and Lonergan would agree with him about this critique of Rorty]. We do not know simply through ‘looking at’ reality as though our minds were simply mirrors of reality. One needs to be very careful not to confuse the activities of the mind with the operations of any (or all) bodily senses [see Ong’s repeated critique of corpuscular, or bodily, epistemology]. In describing how our minds work, one needs to beware of being bewitched by the metaphors that spring from the operations of our senses. Our minds are not like our eyes; or, rather, their [our minds’] activities are far richer, more complex, and more subtle than those of our eyes. It is true that we often say, on getting the point, ‘Oh, I see!’ But putting things together and getting the point normally involve a lot more than ‘seeing,’ and all that we need to do to get to that point can scarcely be met simply by following the imperative, ‘Look’ [Or by following the biblical imperative, ‘Hear, O Israel!’] Even when the point, once grasped, may seem to have been (as it were) right in front of us all along, the reasons why it did not dawn upon us immediately may be many, including the fact that our imaginations were ill-arranged, so that we were expecting and ‘looking for’ the wrong thing. To get to the point at which the evidence finally hits us, we may have to undergo quite a lot of dialectical argument and self-correction” (page xv; material in square brackets added by me).

Thus far, however, Novak himself has not yet gotten to the point at which the evidence supporting Ong’s sweeping claim about communications media hits him. Perhaps Novak’s imagination is ill-arranged for the purposes of grasping Ong’s thought.

It is not especially hard for someone who has read Ong, as Novak has, to paraphrase Ong’s key points in his or her own words.

Nevertheless, it is not easy for people to grasp the import of Ong’s sweeping thought.

If we were to take a hint from Novak, we might attribute the difficulty to certain people having ill-equipped imaginations. But this way of explaining their difficulty in grasping the import of Ong’s sweeping thought might prompt us to wonder what exactly is ill-equipped about their imaginations. For example, are their imaginations ill-equipped in the sense of being already equipped with something that makes it difficult for them to grasp the import of Ong’s sweeping thought, or are their imaginations ill-equipped in the sense of their not having something that they would presumably need to have in order to grasp the import of Ong’s sweeping thought?

In any event, Ong’s imagination was not ill-equipped for grasping the import of Lavelle’s thought about the aural-visual opposition.

No doubt the imagination plays a big role in how we cognitively process sensory information.

No doubt Ong's and Lavelle's and Lonergan's claim about the uncritical visual tendency of Western philosophic thought is greatly strengthened by Andrea Wilson Nightingale's book *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (2004). (However, she does not happen to advert explicitly to the relevant books by Lavelle and Ong and Lonergan.)

But Ong also claims that after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s, printed books and pamphlets somehow worked to expand the visual sense of life among ordinary educated people generally, not just among people who had studied Western philosophy and Christian theology (based on Greek philosophical thought).

Ong includes a certain number of illustrations in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* that are reproduced from printed books by Ramus and his followers (pages 31, 77, 78, 80, 81, 83, 84, 86, 87, 88, 90, 181, 202, 261, 296, 300, 301, 317). Regarding Figure IV titled "Logic in Space" (on page 80), Ong comments in his annotation about it that it expresses the common human urge to construct mandalas such as those mandalas studied by C. G. Jung (page xvi).

No doubt Ramus and his followers delighted in constructing arrays of dichotomized philosophical terms in charts in their printed books.

But the impulse to construct dichotomized opposites in Western cultural history pre-dates the emergence of the Gutenberg printing press in the 1450s, as Jung details in his book *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, 2nd ed., translated by R. F. C. Hull (1970; orig. German ed. in two parts, 1955 and 1956).

For a discussion of Jung's thought, see my 2015 essay "Understanding Jung's Thought" at the UMD's d-Commons: <https://d-commons.d.umn.edu:8443/handle/10792/2576>.

James Collins (1917-1985) in philosophy at St. Louis University, where Ong taught English, perceptively reviewed Ong's two 1958 books in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America*, volume 101 (1959): pages 37-39.

At an earlier time, Collins had published an article about Lavelle's philosophy: "Louis Lavelle on Human Participation" in the *Philosophical Review*, volume 56, number 2 (March 1947): pages 156-183. As a result, Collins' imagination was well arranged to enable him to grasp the import of Ong's thought.

However, print culture is not the end of the story, as it were. According to Ong, our contemporary communications media that accentuate sound had reached a certain critical mass by about 1960 and were deeply impacting Western cultural conditioning over against the visual cultural conditioning in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s.

At a later time, in his annual review of books in philosophy in the journal *Cross Currents*, volume 18 (1968): pages 175-202, Collins briefly but incisively reviewed Ong's book *The*

Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (1967), the expanded version of Ong's Terry Lectures at Yale's Divinity School.

Subsequently, in his annual review of books in philosophy in *Cross Currents*, volume 33 (1983): pages 34-51, Collins briefly but incisively reviewed Ong's book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (1981), Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

Ong himself delivered a plenary address about certain aspects of that book at the annual meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1982, which was published in the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, volume 56 (1982): pages 109-124.

Ong's plenary address is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry* (2002, pages 479-495).

Now, Ong expressed hope that the possibly positive influence of the cultural conditioning of the communications media that accentuate sound. He came to express hope as a result of working with the aural-visual opposition that he borrowed from Lavelle. But of course the aural-visual opposition is another example of a constructed dichotomy of opposites. In the subtitle of Jung's book about alchemy, mentioned above, we note that he hints that the separation of psychic opposites oftentimes leads to a synthesis of the opposites.

According to Ong's account of our Western cultural history, there was an earlier separation of visually dominated culture from aurally dominated culture in ancient and medieval culture in Western culture, a separation that was accentuated in print culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s in Western culture.

Hopefully, the communications media that accentuate sound will condition the psyches of people in contemporary Western culture to move toward a synthesis in their psyches.

Now, the aural sensibility dominated the psyches of our pre-historic and pre-literate human ancestors for centuries – long before the visual sensibility emerged in ancient Greek philosophic thought. But the pre-historic and pre-literate aural sensibility was effectively suppressed in the prestige culture in print culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s in Western culture.

For highly circumstantial account of our pre-historic and pre-literate human ancestors, see Erich Neumann's books *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, translated by R. F. C. Hull (1954; orig. German ed., 1949) and *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, 2nd ed., translated by Ralph Manheim (1963).

Now, in print culture in Western culture, the pre-historic and pre-literate aural sensibility was effectively suppressed in the realm of the psyche that Jung refers to as the "shadow."

According to Jung, people in the second half of life need to undertake to integrate the “shadow” realm of their psyches with their ego-consciousness. But he makes it abundantly clear that this is not easy to do.

No doubt the communications media that accentuate sound resonate deeply in the human psyche of people in Western culture, whose “shadow” carries the stored memory of the aural sensibility of our pre-historic and pre-literate human ancestors.

After Ong delineated certain infrastructures in Western cultural history in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958), he discussed them a bit further in his book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (1962).

Thereafter, Ong shifted his attention from print culture in Western culture to the aural sensibility of our pre-historic and pre-literate human ancestors inasmuch as it was possible for him to do this. Even so, he never stopped talking about the contemporary communications media that accentuate sound.

However, inasmuch as it was possible for him to undertake to do this, Ong was effectively leaving the domain of Western philosophical thought and moving into pre-philosophical thought. In Plato’s dialogue the *Republic* and elsewhere, we learn about the opposition of philosophic thought to poetry, a form of pre-philosophic thought.

In the book *Preface to Plato* (1963), a book that Ong never tired of referring to, Eric A. Havelock argues cogently and convincingly that the oral poetry in the Homeric epics was the target. In terms of the aural-visual opposition that Ong borrowed from Lavelle, the oral poetry in the Homeric epics represents the aural sensibility. By contrast, ancient Greek philosophic thought exemplified by Plato and Aristotle represents the visual sensibility, as does the entire subsequent Western tradition of philosophic thought.

In the last half century or so during which the communications media that accentuate sound have reached a certain critical mass around 1960, we have seen a superficial interest in Native American spirituality arise in American popular culture, as Philip Jenkins shows in his book *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality* (2004). Historically, Native American spirituality represented the aural sensibility, not the culturally conditioned visual sensibility in the prestige and dominant culture in Western culture. However, even though Native American spirituality has caught the imagination of a certain number of Americans, it remains an open question as to how deeply their imaginations have processed the aural sensibility of Native American spirituality.

But in the last half century or so in American culture, we have also seen movement conservatism arise as the tsunami of a backlash against the yeasty 1960s, as Jenkins shows in his book *Decade*

of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America (2006). After Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, riots and violence broke out in certain American cities. In part, the backlash was an understandable reaction to the riots and violence. But certain conservatives capitalized on the understandable reaction against the riots and violence to promote movement conservatism. To this day, movement conservatism has not yet been counter-acted in American culture.

No doubt the serious practice of spirituality taps into the aural sensibility to one degree or another, or at least aims to do so.

No doubt profound mystical experiences involve the aural sensibility.

No doubt a profound experience of the resurfacing aural sensibility involves the imagination – and the entire psyche – and a concomitant reorientation of the culturally conditioned visual sensibility. But the reorientation of the visual sensibility in certain persons may strike others who have not yet had the reorienting experience as threatening. To them, the prospect of the reorienting experience may seem like a breakdown, not as a breakthrough.

Now, the anti-60s conservatives represent the centuries-old culturally conditioned visual sensibility in the prestige and dominant culture in American culture. To this day, the end of their anti-60s backlash is not yet in sight.

No doubt the imaginations of anti-60s conservatives are ill-equipped to cope with changes arising from the resurfacing of the aural sensibility in the 1960s due to the influence of the cultural conditioning of the communications media that accentuate sound. The visual sensibility of their ego-consciousness is like a portable prison-cage they carry around wherever they go.

In any event, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary in 2012 of Ong's birth in 1912, Cornell University Press reissued the three books by Ong that were originally published by Cornell University Press, using print-on-demand technology: (1) *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (1971); (2) *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (1977); and (3) *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (1981).

In my estimate, however, Ong's massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* is of crucial importance for understanding his mature thought about our Western cultural history.